

sometimes

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/5627335) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/5627335>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Hamilton - Miranda
Relationship:	Alexander Hamilton/Elizabeth "Eliza" Schuyler
Character:	Alexander Hamilton , Elizabeth "Eliza" Schuyler , Angelica Schuyler , Philip Hamilton , Angelica Hamilton
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Modern Setting , Character Study , Post-Reynolds Pamphlet
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of a matter of time
Stats:	Published: 2016-01-04 Words: 9737

sometimes

by [iaintinapatientphase](#)

Summary

“...I can write the saddest poem of all tonight.
I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too.”
- Pablo Neruda

Alexander, in the wake of the Reynolds Pamphlet.

Notes

some post reynolds-pamphlet pain, covering the year and a half between william and eliza jr. from alexander's pov, though a companion piece from eliza's is on its way.

i aged up william a bit, and turned peggy's illness into cancer. if you're reading "what we know," first of all thank you! second, this is a standalone that fits nebulously with that universe, making eliza a psych major that does development/fundraising at an orphanage.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

“...I can write the saddest poem of all tonight.
I loved her, and sometimes she loved me too.”
- Pablo Neruda

The years after the pamphlet are hard.

Eliza doesn't look at him the way she used to. The papers describe her as devastated, scorned, abandoned, but none of those are true. His Eliza has never been the type to give into dramatic, performative emotions that way. Instead, she's deeply hurt by the whole thing, in a quiet, simple manner that kills him. The pain of his betrayal is a fact of life that she lives with now, like Alex Jr.'s peanut allergy or rush hour traffic. She doesn't yell, after that first night. She doesn't cry, after about a month or so. She simply doesn't: doesn't curl up next to him while he reads the newspaper in the morning, doesn't send him long stream of consciousness texts while he's out of town, doesn't give him that secret smile anymore. The absence of her warmth is harder to bear than he might have imagined, especially when he watches her give the same love and attention she always has to everyone else.

Eliza is too good to ever let him or anyone else make her hard or cruel, he never thought that she would be. But he never allowed himself to imagine what his life would be like without her smile in it.

A few months after, baby William starts talking and walking. Soon he's tearing around the house, yelling nonsense at the top of his tiny lungs. Alexander is chasing him from room to room, trying to make sure he doesn't get into too much trouble. He narrowly saves William from running headfirst into a wall only for him to crash into a pair of legs seconds later.

Both Alexander and son look up at the obstruction at the same time.

"Mama!" William shrieks.

Eliza smiles and picks him up, settling him on her hip and dark eyes sweeping over him for any damage. "Hi, William. What are you and your father up to?"

Alexander has always loved watching her interact with their children. She somehow manages to strike just the right tone with each of their entire brood of varying ages and temperaments, never talking down to them yet always allowing them to be young and silly.

"Fast," William tells her seriously.

"Yes, you were going very fast," Alexander agrees.

Eliza giggles at that, and meets his gaze with dancing eyes.

William takes advantage of her distracted attention to wriggle out of her arms. She sets him back down and he's off like a shot. "Mama fast! Papa fast!" he yells and disappears into the other room.

Alexander and Eliza follow as bidden, laughing and bumping into more walls than their toddler. When William turns unexpectedly Alex grabs her hand without thinking and pulls her down the hall after him. He hasn't smiled this much in a long time.

Then William darts into his office, his parents following and both stopping abruptly at the sight of Alexander's crumpled pillow and blanket on the couch.

He drops her hand like it's something hot.

"William, son, it's bath time," he says. He looks at his watch (close enough), picking up the small mass of squirming human and holding him in front of him like a shield. "Let's go upstairs."

Eliza startles back into the moment and looks at him directly again. "I just..." she falters.

"I know," he says quietly. "I forgot, too."

He leaves her there, even though every bone in his body fights not to.

Alexander comes home to find Angelica in his living room one day, reading with her namesake. Little Angelica is a freshman in high school now and certainly doesn't need to be read to, but her dark head is tipped onto her aunt's shoulder and she's listening quietly, a rare sight for his second oldest who even Alex recognizes never shuts up. She looks and acts like her aunt more and more each day - he almost had a heart attack the other day when his daughter gave him the same arch, skeptical look that Angelica Schuyler Church has cast his way a thousand times.

Angelica flew in from London, immediately, when she found out about the affair. She came straight to the house, and when she found Alexander hovering outside Eliza's door, too scared to go in, she slapped him, clean across the face. They stood in the hallway with twin expressions of shock; Alexander holding his stinging cheek, Angelica clutching her hand as if it acted of its own volition.

"Sorry," she said, a strange sort of confusion dancing in those eyes that tormented him for so long.

He didn't say anything. She wasn't really sorry, nor should she have been.

She went to her sister, slamming the door behind her, and didn't speak to him for a month, even when he helped her and John move into their new home six blocks away.

When he comes fully into the room, he sees that the Angelicas are reading something in French. Something his fourteen year old daughter probably shouldn't be, if the obscenely muscled, shirtless man on the cover is any indication of the content inside.

"*Bonjour*, Angelicas."

Two sets of bright eyes look up.

"*Salut*, Dad. Aunt Angelica brought me some novels from Paris."

"You know, little me," Angelica the elder says with an unexpected smile, "your father is really way more fluent than I am. You should have him read this with you."

"I'll pass on reading my innocent daughter that depraved garbage," he says. "Don't worry, angel, I'll get you some better material."

"Can I talk to Uncle Lafayette next time he calls? It would be good practice with a native speaker," his daughter says.

"Sure," he agrees. "Not a bad idea."

"I thought you didn't want her exposed to depraved garbage," Angelica jokes.

He laughs, forced at first and then genuinely, when he realizes that glint in her eyes isn't malicious this time. They've all agreed to keep things as normal as possible for the children and have faked a lot of smiles and small talk over the last few months. This, however, feels natural and puts him at ease.

“Speaking of,” Little Angelica says slyly, “I heard there’s a French romance novel about Uncle Lafayette. And you’re in it.”

Angelica Schuyler laughs harder. “Oh, there is. I have a copy at home.”

“So do I. Laf autographed them and sent them to everyone we know,” Alex sighs. “It’s obviously entirely fictional. The first edition called me ‘Jean Hamilton,’ for fucks sake. They should honestly be sued for writing ‘historical fiction’ while the man’s clearly alive and well, but he thinks it’s hilarious. It might get turned into a movie and he’s thinking about investing.”

“So you two never hooked up during the war? Because my friend Mary read it and she said there’s a scene where you guys make out under the stars. Apparently it’s very romantic. Mary said she cried.”

“Who the fuck is Mary? And no, I never ‘hooked up with’ Lafayette,” he says, voice rising in pitch indignantly. “We were close friends, nothing more.”

“That’s what you said about that guy John Laurens until we were old enough for The Talk.”

Alexander collapses into a chair and groans, covering his face with his hands. “Why did I teach you how to read again?”

“To show me off at dinner parties,” his insufferable, incredible daughter quips. “Anyway, are the rumors true?”

“No!”

“Oh,” she says, looking a little annoyed. “That’s not as interesting a story.”

“Sorry to disappoint. I do have some good ones about President Washington and I doing meaningful, honest government work if you’re interested.”

She mocks falling asleep against her aunt’s shoulder, who hasn’t stopped laughing since that ridiculous novel was brought up and looks absurdly proud of her namesake. “You should have made out with him. He’s super hot. Everyone at school is jealous that he stays with us sometimes.”

“I’d like to revise my earlier question and ask why I had a daughter at all, please,” he whines through his fingers.

“Don’t be so heteronormative, Mr. First Openly Bisexual Cabinet Official. It’s not just the girls that have noticed.”

“You should tell them he has a son about your age,” Angelica the elder chimes in. “Georges is as much like his father as Philip is yours.”

“Much better looking and even louder then?”

“Angelica? Not the one I brought into this world only to have her delight in making my life miserable, the Schuyler one who spent all her summers growing up hunting with other rich people. There’s a pistol in the safe, would you mind grabbing it and fucking killing me?”

“And miss the chance to watch you fail to discipline your six mini-mes for acting exactly like you? No way,” she laughs. “I imagine this is how Washington felt watching you and Thomas during cabinet meetings.”

He groans again. “Angelica Hamilton, please repeat house rule number six for your aunt.”

“Schuyler-Hamilton house rule number six,” she recites. “‘This nation’s disgrace of a Vice President’ is only to be referred to as ‘Jefferson,’ ‘that asshole, Jefferson,’ ‘that hypocrite from Virginia,’ or something similarly irreverent and always accompanied by air quotes for an extra dash of fully earned disrespect.”

“Thank you, angel. No swearing.”

“Okay, ‘that hypocrite from Nevis,’” she says with an eyeroll. “‘TJ’ kind of looks like Uncle Lafayette, have you ever noticed that?”

“No!” Alex yelps at the same time Angelica agrees “Yes!”

“I’m just saying,” his daughter says innocently.

“I would love to be murdered right now,” he mutters.

“Well, you try to stay alive. I gotta go get ready.”

“Where are you going?”

“Mom’s fundraiser?” she says, like it’s obvious. Like he and Eliza have said more than five words to each other this week. “The kids are singing for the rich people so I’m accompanying them on the piano.”

“Oh. Right.” He tries to pretend like he knew that, like the reminder that he and his wife are living entirely separate lives is okay. Like he’s not lonelier than he’s ever been.

“You could try actually talking to her, Dad,” she says gently. “She’s still Mom. She doesn’t bite.”

“I know, baby,” he says, managing a smile. “Go get ready.”

She rolls her eyes again, because of course she does, she’s fourteen, but lets it go and disappears upstairs.

He closes his eyes and rubs his aching forehead. It’s always like this, lately. He walks around crushed under the weight of what he’s done, and whenever he thinks he can push it away for even a five minute conversation with his daughter, it comes crashing back down.

“Chill, Alex,” Angelica says, not unkindly. “It’ll get easier.” She gives his hand a squeeze on her way out the door.

He feels better for a second. Then he’s alone again.

After that, Eliza’s terrifying, overprotective older sister is somehow the first to forgive him. They’re scarily alike, the two of them, both mercurial, flirty geniuses who love Eliza more than life itself. Despite everything she said, Angelica really does understand why he did it - the pamphlet, at least. She’s always backed him in all his political maneuvers, the only one who’s always pushed him harder instead of pleading with him to get some rest for once. She knows how the accusations of corruption could destroy everything he built, and even if she thinks - correctly - that he overreacted, she gets why he felt the need to address them so completely.

Politics aside, she’s never believed that she could be satisfied with one man - she and John have a

discreetly open marriage - and craves the challenge of seduction. She recognizes herself, with the casual arrogance they share, in Alexander's struggle and can forgive what she imagines in him what she refuses to apologize for in herself.

He lets her believe it. It's easier than trying to explain his twisted mess of abandonment, inadequacy, and intimacy issues that led him to that particular form of self destruction. He's grateful for her forgiveness nonetheless. Since the pamphlet, Alex has overheard them on the phone or in other rooms where they think he can't hear and he's always "*him*" or "*he*" with significant italics, and when absolutely unavoidable "*your husband*:" the nameless, faceless monster that hurt their beloved Eliza. She's the first Schuyler to talk to him like he's a human being again.

They don't seem to remember that she's *his* beloved Eliza, too.

Eliza forgets again and it hurts like he never knew possible.

She's spending a night out with her sisters - Peggy's been in remission for a few years, but it's gotten bad again lately, and with Angelica finally stateside again the Schuyler sisters have taken every opportunity to spend time together.

He closes John and James's door behind him and finds a rosy cheeked, very drunk Eliza in the hallway.

"Hi," she whispers, or attempts to. She smiles at him, for real, and his chest hurts. It's been so long since she's really done that.

"Hi," he says, smiling back at her, like a reflex. "How are your sisters?"

"They're good." She's still smiling, rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet. God, he loves her.

"Good," he echoes. He forgot this part, the way that seventeen years of marriage makes it hard to parse your actions from your reactions to them. It's more than a side of the bed, the way you divide up chores, the secret shorthand. Sometimes he doesn't remember who he was before her and she before him. He's sure he never noticed what he put in his coffee before, but somehow he picked up her paranoia about artificial sweeteners and avoids them at all costs. Did she always read before bed, or did it start as a way to pass the time when he kept her waiting, buried in work?

He wonders who he might have been if he had never met her. Would he have cheated on John, had they ever figured it out? (She might have been the one he cheated with.) Would she have been happier with someone else? (Probably.)

She steps close to him and he takes a step backwards. Action. Reaction. Even now.

She kisses him.

Her lips are soft, warm, and so familiar it hurts. She tastes faintly of the expensive champagne the sisters never broke the habit of favoring, and when she opens her mouth he imagines he can taste the ghosts of the bubbles on her tongue.

She takes a step backward and he follows without thinking, his hands somehow locked on her waist and keeping her pressed to him before he realizes where they're going - down the hall, where their - her - bedroom is.

He tears himself away. "Eliza, no," he says as firmly as he can manage.

"Alexander, yes," she says, mimicking his tone and kisses him again, this time more insistent. Her hand slides up his neck to cradle the back of his head, her fingers tangling delicately in his hair and pressing in those grooves in his skull like she used to. His resolve evaporates and he follows her down the hall. He's never been able to deny her anything.

He loses himself for a moment, mouth moving from hers down her neck and back up. She turns them and sits him on the edge of their bed, climbing into his lap. Her thighs bracket his tightly, and he's immediately hard, biting down on her lip and making her squirm against him. He moves a hand from her waist to slide up the back of her shirt and feels like a shock goes through him when he touches her bare skin.

More than a shock, really, more like a lightening bolt. He pulls away from her for real, this time, pushing her gently off his lap and standing as far away from her as he can manage.

"We can't. You'll regret this in the morning and I can't do that to you," he says.

"No, I won't," she insists, swollen lips slipping into a pout. "I want to. We haven't had sex in suuuuuchhhhhh a long time."

"It's not a good idea," he says weakly. He holds on to the dresser behind him for dear life.

She pouts again. "Please?"

He almost breaks at that. Almost.

"No, Eliza," he says, harsher than he intended.

"Why not? I know you want to."

"Go to sleep."

She folds her arms, irritated, and the set of her mouth slips into something nastier. "Why can't you give me what I want this one time? Is it too much for you? I think I've earned that much."

He flinches. "Stop."

"You keep ruining my life, you know. You're the one who cheated and I'm the one who keeps getting punished for it." She sighs. "I haven't had sex in over a year, Alexander. I was super pregnant and now I'm a scorned wife. How is that fair at all? I didn't do anything wrong, and I have to be celibate now."

"You don't have to be," he mumbles, needlessly contrary and childish.

She laughs bitterly. "Right. My options are A. forgive you for cheating on me with a twenty year old and then telling the whole world about it, then try to forget that long enough to have sex with you sober, or B. have sex with someone else, which I can't do, because unlike some people, I meant my marriage vows. Fuck you."

You could leave, he almost says. They both hear it anyway.

"I'm not doing this right now, you're drunk."

"Don't patronize me," she snaps. "I'm sober enough to remember that even if I'm still mad at you, I don't actually hate you and I would like to have sex with my husband for once in our miserable

lives.”

“You will hate me, I promise, when you wake up in the morning and remember this conversation. You’ll hate me more if I let this go further. I’m not going to hurt you any more.”

“Too fucking late,” she says angrily, but her eyes are sad. “I lied. I hate you sometimes.”

It hits him like a punch in the throat and he takes a shuddering breath. “That’s fair,” he says quietly.

“Only sometimes,” she says, looking down at her hands twisted together in her lap. “I don’t know what to do with ‘sometimes.’”

“Me either.” He doesn’t know what to do, ever. She’s all he wants, and all he can’t have.

“Get out. Please.”

He gets out. He makes it all the way down to his office-turned-bedroom before punching the wall so hard he breaks a finger.

There are other, smaller moments. She’s still everything to him, the smallest nuance of her expression determining whether he has a good day or not. He tries not to think about how pathetic it is, the way he clings to her smallest gesture and shies away from anything that might make her even the tiniest bit upset. He can’t help it. Without his knowledge (or permission, really) she became the center of his life. He feels off balance without her, unmoored and untethered, floating through space. These little moments are lifelines, no matter how painful they are or how dark it is when they’re over.

She calls, late one night, and asks him to come sit with her at the hospital Peggy’s been in for a few days. She’s exhausted and snappish and verging on hysterical, refusing to trust the doctors when they say that her little sister just needs to rest and let the chemo work. Alexander takes her step by step through Peggy’s file, drawing on his self-taught medical knowledge and waking up his old friend Edward to fill in the gaps. It works - her fingers stop drumming on any available surface and she apologizes to the doctors during morning rounds. She asks him to leave before her sister wakes up.

He works himself into a frenzy during the midterms, and she’s there. When his fingers freeze up one night, he doesn’t know what else to do but yell for her. She sits on the couch next to him and he feels himself lean into her like a plant turning towards the sun. She massages his hands gently until he can move them without pins and needles, then takes over typing as he dictates the rest of his article to her in his hoarse, exhausted voice.

They keep it together, per their agreement, for the kids, sitting side by side at parent teacher conferences, piano recitals, soccer games, Christmas, Thanksgiving dinner at the Washingtons’. They laugh with their children, take turns sitting up with them when they get sick, juggle six competing schedules like they’ve always done. Sometimes it’s strained, sometimes it’s not. Most of the time Alexander can’t tell if they’re faking it or not.

They both forget, again.

Or maybe they just pretend to.

Alexander doesn't know either way for sure, but he knows that neither of them are thinking any coherent thoughts as he stumbles into the bedroom, Eliza's legs locked around his waist and his tongue in her mouth. He deposits her on the bed, drops to his knees in front of her, and helps her twist out of her jeans. He tries to touch every inch of skin he's had to neglect for so long, but she's fidgeting impatiently above him so he stops only for the highlights: a kiss on her perfectly formed ankle, making her shiver with a finger running over the thin skin behind her knee, a gentle bite to the soft flesh of her inner thigh. She whimpers when he presses a kiss to her clit and yelps when he licks into her slowly, whispering a thousand "I love yous" he held inside for the past months where she can't hear.

Her reactions are thrilling in their familiarity: her voice still rises almost to a squeak when he curls his fingers just so, her leg still twitches involuntarily when he blows lightly over her sensitive skin. He can feel her getting close and can practically count down from ten, knowing exactly when to pin her hips lightly to the bed and work her gently through her climax.

He wipes his mouth with another kiss to her hip and leans over her, drinking in the sight of her flushed skin. Her eyes flutter open. Her lips move, and he reads his name on her lips but she doesn't say it out loud. He wants the sound, needs those four syllables in her voice, like a benediction, like a point on the map saying he's here, he's real, he's with her.

"Please," he whispers.

She kisses him instead, still hot and pushy and needy like she didn't come thirty seconds ago. He needs her so badly he's willing to take anything she'll give, letting her push him onto his back and dig her nails into his sides. She sits up and he chases her mouth with his, pulled towards her by some force he can't name. She pushes him back down with a firm but gently shaking hand and settles back down, seated across his thighs.

She touches his hands where they're fisted in the sheets and gives him a meaningful look. He understands, and fights not to move as she takes him apart, slowly but surely, touching every inch of him until he's shaking. The softest ghost of her hand over his throat has him unable to breathe, the scrape of her nails on his stomach too much to bear. It's too much and not enough at the same time; sensory overload after so long without her but still not what he needs, what every cell in his body is screaming for.

She scrapes her teeth along his collarbone, plants a kiss directly on his jugular, and looms over him, dark eyes unfathomable. He's begging, unabashedly, strings of "pleasepleaseplease" and "Eliza" tumbling from his mouth. She kisses him again in what might be an answer and finally slides down onto him. His head falls silent for the first time in months.

He grips her hips, trying to slow down and speed up at the same time. He sits up and wraps one arm around her, pulling them chest to chest and working one hand in between them, twisting his fingers until she comes again, biting back something that might be his name into his shoulder, dragging him shuddering over the edge.

He keeps his arms locked around her, catching his breath. He feels as whole as he's ever been, that hunger in his stomach screaming for her over these past few months gone.

He moves to adjust their positions, to grab a blanket, to keep his legs from cramping (to move away from her before she can leave him again) but she shakes her head, tightens her arms around his neck, and keeps him pressed against her. They both exhale, sagging against each other with something like relief.

She finally slips under the blankets, tugging him down with her. He lays down and wraps his arms

around her, cradling her head against his chest and slipping his fingers through her soft hair, massaging her scalp gently. She hums appreciatively and relaxes fully against him. He can feel her eyelashes flutter closed against his chest.

It's a truth universally acknowledged in their marriage that Eliza doesn't need him. He's always known that when he has to be away for work or if God forbid anything happened to him, she'd be alright. But they used to pretend, sometimes. She let him play at taking care of her, protecting her, but she never needed him. (Not the way he needs her.) She's never been clingy like this and it would worry him if he wasn't just as desperate for any kind of intimacy.

They don't actually say anything. The moment feels too fragile to risk jostling with the wrong word or tone. But they do fall asleep tangled together.

It's almost enough.

He has to be at the Pentagon by eight, which means he has to leave her (again) asleep in bed to go get ready. It's jarring, leaving their shared bedroom to go back downstairs to the reminder that everything is not actually fine, but he's too happy to let it bother him that much. The day passes quickly, and he can't even find it in him to yell at anyone.

She's gone when he gets home, but that's okay. He helps the boys with their homework, signs a permission slip for Philip, takes Angelica on a long drive around the neighborhood so she can practice for the driver's test.

By the time they get home, it's close to bedtime for the younger Hamiltons. He can hear Eliza managing the younger three upstairs, her voice a comforting, familiar kind of background noise. He spends twenty minutes handling a few urgent emails, then realizes he needs a particular business card with notes on it he had in his pant pocket last night and thinks might have fallen out of his pocket next to the bed.

The door is locked.

She must hear it, must still be awake, because she comes to the door immediately, something in her face hardening when she sees it's him and not one of the kids.

He opens and closes his mouth inelegantly, taken severely aback. "I, uh, I think I dropped some notes and a business card in here last night."

"Yeah," she says tonelessly. "I put them on your desk."

"Okay. Thanks."

Eliza looks at him expectantly. "Is that it?"

"Yeah? I guess?" He's at a rare loss for words, but he doesn't know that anyone could find the words for what he's feeling right now, staring at his wife of almost twenty years, looking like she barely knows him with a mark in the shape of his mouth still visible on her neck.

"Okay, then. Goodnight," she says, and closes the door. The lock clicks louder than a gunshot.

Ever since that night a couple weeks ago he's been on edge. He's picking fights, ignoring emails, and almost got thrown out of court for refusing to let an overruled objection lie.

Then Philip's school calls and informs him that his seventeen year old broke a student teacher's nose.

"President" Adams is hiding in Massachusetts somewhere so he leaves his deputy in charge and rushes off to the school.

The receptionist, to his credit, doesn't blink when Alexander bursts into the office, barely through the door before asking where his son is.

"Philip is in the conference room, Secretary Hamilton," he says in a cool, even tone. "Mr. Smith would like to speak with you before you take him home."

"Have you called- Does Eliza - is she here?"

"We haven't called Dr. Schuyler-Hamilton."

"Okay. Thanks. Good," he says lamely and pokes his head into the conference room, where Philip sits looking entirely unrepentant and without a scratch on him, thank God. When he sees his father, however, the self-satisfied look drops off his face immediately. "Hi, Dad," he says warily.

"Do I need to defend you?" Alex asks in his best "not-interested-in-games" tone.

Philip recognizes it immediately, swallows, and shakes his head. "He was asking for it, but I shouldn't have hit him."

Alex nods and steps into the office, emerging a few minutes later having traded a personally guided White House field trip (which will require sneaking past the fuckstick president's usually empty office, but he'll figure that out later) to negotiate a suspension down to twenty hours of community service and a ten page essay on theories of nonviolent resistance.

"Let's go," he says to Philip, who jumps out of his chair and follows him out of the office.

"Dad, I can explain."

Alex holds up a hand, distracted by a large white van across the street.

"Is that a fucking paparazzi van?"

"Hmm?" Philip glances over. "Oh, yeah. They're here every day. Lots of famous parents, etc. They're probably psyched to see you here."

"The school hasn't done anything about it?" Alex demands indignantly. The principal had been deferential to a fault and hadn't given him the fight he'd been spoiling for. He's still worked up.

"They're not on school property, there's not a lot they can do. Aren't you a lawyer?"

"Yeah, well, luckily I have a lot more pull than your average lawyer," he says, pulling out his phone and snapping a picture of the vulture's license plate. He gets in the car and waits for Philip to buckle his seatbelt before handing him his phone. "Text that photo to your Uncle Herc and tell him he's outside your school every day and whatever else you know about him."

"You're siccing the director of the CIA on that guy?"

"Do it, Philip."

"Jesus, Dad, chill." He does it anyway and tucks the phone back into the cup holder.

Alex pulls out of the parking lot, stepping a little too hard on the accelerator. "Would you like to explain yourself?"

"He's not even a real teacher," Philip says defensively. "He's a grad student at GW. Do you think G-Dubs would like the school named after him sending that kind of garbage into high schools?"

"That's not how it works. And don't call the President that."

"You called John Adams a fat motherfucker last week, and he's actually the president. Which is a pretty rude thing to say about someone, by the way. You should have just said motherfucker. Also, we actually know the Washingtons, we were like just there for Thanksgiving. Martha thinks G-Dubs is hilarious."

"Mrs. Washington," he corrects. "You still need to be respectful."

"Eacker told the whole class that you used your position as Treasury Secretary to manipulate the markets and get rich. And he knew I was in that class."

Alex tightens his hands on the steering wheel. "What?"

"I know! I wasn't going to let him get away with that, because it's not true, so I raised my hand and was waiting all polite and everything and then he called on me and LAUGHED, Dad, he laughed and told the whole class that he wasn't interested in hearing whatever excuses you had given me."

"You can't hit people just because they're wrong," he tries.

"I wasn't going to! I really wasn't. I said that Congress had investigated and everything and there was no proof of anything at all and even though everyone agreed with me - even kids who I know are Republicans - he laughed again, like a douche, and said 'innocent men don't write novels to defend themselves.'"

Alex grits his teeth. "So you hit him then?"

"No! I was still being so respectful about it, I mean kind of, I asked him why he was lying to the class and then Theo said I should shut up and I mean, fair, so I did. So I waited after class to talk to him and see what the fuck his fucking problem was -"

"Language."

"- and that's when I hit him."

"You just hit him out of the blue?"

Philip falls silent. Never a good sign with his three eldest. James and John have figured out middle child Eliza's economy of words thing, but his two oldest sons and daughter have inherited his tendency for run on sentences and inability to let things go.

"Philip, why?"

Philip looks down at his shoes, mouth twisting. "He said he wasn't surprised I was dumb enough to believe your lies when my parents were a corrupt asshole and a woman too stupid to leave him."

They pull up to a red light. Alex sighs and rests his head on the steering wheel.

"So that's when you hit him."

“Yeah.”

Alexander takes a deep breath, and tries to will himself to be mad at his son and to restrain himself from turning the car around and punching that shithead himself. He’s already trying to remember who he knows at GW that can get him fired.

“You still shouldn’t hit teachers,” he says weakly.

“Are you kidding me? Like you wouldn’t have hit him then? He talked shit about MOM, what was I supposed to do?”

Alex doesn’t answer.

“Light’s green.”

He sits back up, with considerable effort, and continues to drive. “Your mother wouldn’t want you fighting for any reason. She can’t take this right now.”

“Just don’t tell her. She doesn’t want to talk to you anyway.”

“Watch it.”

“What are you going to say to her? ‘Hey Eliza, I know we haven’t spoken in a year and a half but anyways, Philip punched his teacher because he made fun of you for something you didn’t even do wrong. Guess what? I also managed to go the whole drive home without cheating on you again. Okay back to my office see you in three years love you bye!’”

“I spoke to your mother this morning,” he says pathetically. “And it was only the one person.”

“That’s really not any better.”

“I know,” he sighs. “I don’t know how to tell her about this without hurting her more.”

“Then don’t tell her. I’m not just saying that so I don’t get in trouble. Someone has to look out for Mom’s feelings.”

“Harsh.”

“Sorry? You know I’m right.”

“I know.”

Philip is quiet for a rare moment. “Why didn’t Mom leave you?”

“I don’t know, son.”

“Sometimes I think she should have. Like if I was married and my partner cheated on me, I’d leave them.”

“I know, that’s what you probably should do. But marriage is more complicated than that.”

“Is it? I think Mom’s just a saint.”

“No, your mother’s as human as the rest of us. She just behaves better than everyone, which is more impressive than being a saint or a literal angel like I thought she was when I met her.”

“Saints are human, Dad.”

“Right.” Eliza takes the children to church every Sunday, always has. Even though he’s uncomfortable with organized religion, scarred by judgmental Catholic priests who looked down on his mother, he used to go with intermittently. It made her happy. He hasn’t been invited lately, for obvious reasons. “Anyway.”

“If you think she’s so great, why did you do that to her?” he asks angrily.

“Philip,” he sighs, “this really isn’t a conversation you and I should be having.”

“Why not? I’m almost eighteen and it’s not like I don’t know what happened. I’ve read that entire thing at least a hundred times.”

“What?” he chokes. “Don’t. I never intended for you to see that.”

“You put it on the Internet, Dad. We’ve all read it.”

“Who’s ‘all?’ Angelica? Alex?”

“And James.”

“Fuck,” he hisses. “God fucking damnit.”

“They wanted to know. John asked me why you and Mom were so sad all the time.”

“We were trying to keep it together for you guys,” Alex says. They’re stuck in traffic. He starts flipping through the radio presets at random.

“Well, no offense, but you did a pretty horrible job,” Philip says, matter of fact and tactless and just like his father.

“Well, no offense, but it’s hard to keep a straight face when your wife fucking hates you,” he says, more bitterly than he intended.

“Mom doesn’t hate anybody.”

“Sometimes she hates me. She told me.”

Philip whistles. “Damn.”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t blame her.”

“I don’t, either. But it’s hard. Because she didn’t leave. But she doesn’t talk to me. So we’re in this weird limbo of not being separated but not being together.”

“I mean, you apologized, right?” Alex nods. “When was the last time?”

“The night after I published it.” Now that he says it out loud, it doesn’t sound that great.

“That’s not great,” Philip says. “You should try doing that again.”

“I don’t know. She gets so upset whenever anyone brings it up, and I hate doing that to her.”

“You already did it, Dad. The least you can do is try to make it right.”

"I am trying. I'm trying really hard. I just don't know what else to do. Sometimes I think that we're okay again but then something comes up and reminds us and then we're back to square one."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Sometimes everything seems okay again, like it never happened, and then all of a sudden I remember. I know that's how Mom feels."

"I never wanted to hurt her."

"Why did you do it? For real."

"It's complicated." Philip starts to interject indignantly, but he raises a hand and cuts him off. "I'm still going to try to explain it, but you have to understand that it is complicated and that you, thank God, have had very different life experiences than I have, and that makes some of this difficult for you to empathize with. You can sympathize, and you can figure it out objectively, but it will never be easy to understand."

"Okay."

"Also, I know that you know this already, but this is really hard and shitty for me to talk about, but you're my son, and I love you. I owe you an explanation and I'll try to give you one."

"Okay."

"Okay," he echoes. "You know my father wasn't around, and my mother died when I was twelve. After she died, I moved in with my cousin, who was struggling with mental illness and killed himself a few months later. My brother and I got shifted into foster care after that, and bounced around the system together until he left when he was eighteen. He left me behind in this horrible home with four other abandoned kids. I don't blame him, it's not like I didn't move here the second I could. But he was all I had left. He had the same eyes as our mom, and when he left so did the last thing I had of her."

Philip is silent in the passenger seat, eyes fixed on the floor.

"My father didn't give a shit about me. I tried to get in touch with him a million times when I was still in the system, but he never came. In psychology speak - look at some of your mother's books, it's all there - that sets the stage for some pretty deep seated abandonment issues. Everyone in my life has left me. Even when I got older, too. Everyone just kept dying, during the war, all my friends, all the guys around us, they got killed. I told you about John, and how he," he pauses. "He died, and left me here. I had your mom, and her family, and you and your siblings not long after, but it felt like borrowed time. Like it was just a matter of time until you all left me too."

He takes a deep breath, and focuses very carefully on the sea of brake lights in front of him. "So there's that. It's also hard to shake off growing up as a poor illegitimate child to a single mother in a very Catholic, very judgmental neighborhood. My mother did some... questionable things to survive, and they never let her forget it. All the nice nuclear families didn't want anything to do with us. When I got here, I finally had the chance to shake that off. But then there were new ways for me to be inadequate. I didn't have the same education as everyone at Columbia. I was smarter than all of them, I knew it, but I had to catch up on Common Core science and standard grammar and all the bullshit busy work you hate. It's a language of semantics that has nothing to do with actual learning, but everyone spoke it and I didn't. I didn't even know what a syllabus was on my first day of class." He sees the corner of Philip's mouth quirk up out of the corner of his eye. "I swear. There's only so much that shitty dial up and the entire library in a crappy, forgotten town can teach you."

“I was poor on top of that. I had a full ride, but there’s so much other shit you have to spend money on that no one told me about. I had no idea how expensive books could be. And when winter came I almost got frostbite because I didn’t know how cold it would really get or what I was supposed to do about it. Hercules gave me my first pair of gloves. They were huge on me, but they literally kept my fingers from falling off until my stipend check came through and I could get my own and a better coat.” He smiles at the memory, one of the rare bright spots in his life pre-war. “Anyway. Lots of class anxiety going on.”

“So you married Mom? Old money, would have been a debutante except Aunt Angelica didn’t want to so none of them did, uses “summer” as a verb Mom?”

Alexander laughs despite himself. “She’s not a snob, be nice. But yeah, I did, somehow. Eliza’s too good for anyone, but she was definitely too good for a poor bastard who hadn’t even finished college at the time.”

“Weren’t you Washington’s chief of staff then? That seems like a pretty big deal.”

“Not exactly,” he says, frowning with old resentment he’s never been able to quite let go. “I was his aide. I was his chief of staff in all but name, but I couldn’t have that. Or command of a battalion like I wanted.”

“That’s still not bad. And look at you now. I mean I’m about to be taller than you but you are America’s Third Most Powerful Man. According to Time Magazine, anyway.”

“Thanks, son.” It feels weirdly good to talk about this with him. It’s still hard, turning himself inside out and exposing all the things he tries to hide, but Philip deserves to know who his father really is.

“Anytime. Continue, please.”

“Right. Where were we? Oh, your mom is too good for me, right. Well, she is. Like I said before, Eliza’s better than an angel, because she’s a real live person and is still as great as she is. So…” he trails off. “This is the hard part.”

“Okay.”

“We have a cocktail of abandonment issues, massive insecurities, and incredible pressure from trying to hold a country together, all mixing together and convincing an addled, stressed out, deeply paranoid mind that it was only a matter of time until your mom realized she was way too good for me and left.”

“That’s insane,” Philip says incredulously. “She would never do that.”

“Logically, I know that. But when you’ve lost everything and everyone you’ve ever cared about, you become pretty convinced that you’re not destined to have or keep anything good. Everyone will leave eventually. Life had been unfair for so long, why would it change now?”

“That’s…” Philip thinks it over. “That’s such a pessimistic way to look at things.”

Alex nods. “I did everything in my considerable power to make sure you grew up in a happy, stable home and that’s why.”

He can practically see the gears turning in his son’s head. “If you were worried she was going to leave you, why would you do the one thing that would make sure she would?”

“To make sure she would,” he affirms. “To prove myself right. To make sure she would leave because I did something wrong, not because of who I am. I could deal with my actions being wrong, I couldn’t deal with me being wrong. Does that make sense?”

“Kind of. That’s so messed up though.”

“Yeah, it is. I warned you.”

“Yeah. So when... that girl came along, it was kind of like pulling the trigger on an already loaded gun.”

“That’s good, you should write that down,” he says proudly. His son, the poet. “That’s essentially what happened. Just the once would have been bad enough, but the repeat occasions... yeah. It was a weird form of self-destruction and masochism, like proving to myself that I was as shitty as everyone thought I was. I was just doing what I was raised to do. It was a way to get out of being responsible and ending it.”

“You still did it. You lied about it for a long time,” Philip says accusingly, but not angrily.

“Which was absolutely wrong, I’ve never said it isn’t. This is an explanation, it’s not an excuse. I know I was wrong.”

They turn on to their street.

“Thanks for telling me all that. I don’t like it but I feel better about it.”

“Me too.” It feels nice to explain it all, to put together the puzzle pieces of his mind and have someone else understand, even if only for a moment. He would have explained to Eliza, but she already knew.

“What are you going to tell her?”

“I can’t lie to her any more.”

“I really don’t want her to know what that asshole said, though.”

“I know,” he says heavily, and turns the car off. “But Eliza’s tough. She’ll want to know what happened.”

“Can we do it together?”

“Of course,” he says, and walks into the house, grateful to have his son by his side.

She comes into his office early on a Saturday morning. It’s been a long time since she sought him out, and even longer since she came into the office that’s become his bedroom.

He drops his pen immediately and looks up at her. She looks beautiful, as always. Pale and anxious, he notes and starts to worry, but still beautiful.

“Hi. How are you? Here, sit,” he says breathily, nervous in her presence like they’re in their twenties again.

She sits slowly, cautiously in the chair he pulls out for her, but is careful not to touch even an inch of his skin. She hasn’t looked directly at him since that night two months ago.

“Alexander,” she says, and his heart leaps. It’s been so long since she used his full name, he’s gone months without hearing it. Those four syllables in her voice are like a bell calling him home.

“Yes?”

“I’m pregnant.” She looks at him, sitting rigidly upright in her chair, fingers clasped tightly in her lap.

A hand rises to his mouth. “What? Really?”

She nods.

And then bursts into tears where he can see for the first time in almost a year and a half.

He rushes around his desk to sit next to her. He reaches out a hand to put on her back but jerks it away. Is it okay to touch her? He tries for a shoulder touch instead but pulls back again. He flails for a moment before deciding to go big or go home and slides closer, wrapping an arm fully around her shaking shoulders and pulling her to his chest.

He realizes it’s worked, with a rush of triumph and pain, when she turns her head and sobs into his shoulder, one small hand clutching his shirt. He rocks her back and forth gently. “It’s okay, Eliza, it’s gonna be okay,” he says soothingly.

She freezes, suddenly, as if just realizing where she is and who she’s with. She sits back up, leaning as far away from him as possible in her chair. “How can it be okay? How can we have another child when we don’t even speak to each other?”

“I mean, you can... you don’t have to. If you don’t want to, it’s your choice, you can... if that’s what you want,” he struggles. He knows his deeply religious wife would never even consider it, but she can barely look at him and he can’t imagine pressuring her into having their child at this point in their lives.

“No, Alexander.”

“Okay, good,” he says with relief, backing up and collapsing on the couch. A baby. He smiles, even though he feels a bit nauseous. “We’ll make it work.”

“How? We already have six other children we barely know what to do with.”

“We’ll figure it out. We can do this, we can get past everything and make it work.”

“That’s not your decision to make.”

“We’ve already made that decision, Eliza, we’ve been doing our best for the last year and a half. But this is good,” he says, nodding frantically and voice rising with a touch of mania. “A new baby can be a new start for us. We can fix everything. If you want to.”

“If I want to?”

“I’m not going to pressure you into anything, but you already know where I stand. I’ve spent the last year and a half trying to make up for everything and I know it’ll never be enough but we can get past this.”

“Why do you get to force me into making that decision? I’m not the one who fucked up,” she says sourly. “It’s not fair.”

“No, it’s not, and I’m sorry. But I’m begging you, please, tell me what you want and I’ll give it to you.” He means it, desperately. He’d give her anything she asked for if only she would just *look* at him again.

“I want this to have never happened!” she says, surprising even herself with how intensely it burst out of her. She doesn’t stop. “I want to go back to the days where people didn’t look at me like I’m a pathetic idiot. I want to have never heard the name Maria Reynolds. I want you back, like before, when I knew that nothing could be that bad if you were there, but it was bad anyway and now I don’t know what to do. I don’t want you to leave. I never did. That’s the fucked up thing. But how can I let you stay after what you did?”

“I already stayed, Eliza, it’s been a year and a half.” He sighs heavily. “When we talked about what we were going to do after... everything, I said I would leave. That I would give you full custody.” His voice breaks and he wipes away a tear roughly with the back of his hand. He still can’t believe he let those words come out of his mouth, even dreamed it possible after his childhood without a father. But he couldn’t stand to see her upset. “All you said was that we were going to keep it together for the kids. You had the chance and you didn’t want me to leave.”

“What was I supposed to do? Destroy the lives of our six children? Ruin your life by taking them away from you?” she asks helplessly. “I can’t believe you ever thought that I would do that in the first place.”

“I didn’t, not really, but I would have let you if that’s what you wanted. I’m thankful everyday that you didn’t, but sometimes I wish you had.”

She bristles. “What does that mean?”

“Then at least I’d know I had nothing left to lose. I can’t keep doing this halfway thing we’ve been doing for the last few months. With you ignoring me for weeks and then acting like nothing’s ever been wrong. After we spent the night together and the next day you looked at me like I was nothing to you...” he trails off. “I can’t do it. I’d rather us not be together at all than sometimes. I know this is a lot and we haven’t talked about it in a while but I can’t do it anymore.”

She looks down at her hands, twisting them in her lap. If it were three years ago, he would hold one in hers to keep her from working herself into a nervous spiral. But it’s not. He’s never felt so far away from her.

“I was afraid to talk about it,” she says quietly, still not looking at him. “I was scared that you would convince me to forgive you and I wouldn’t have the words to stop you. That’s why I almost burned your letters. Why I did burn mine. I didn’t want to remember how you got me to fall in love with you.”

“But-”

“I know,” she cuts him off gently. “I know that isn’t how it happened. But sometimes it was easier to pretend like I didn’t have a choice in it. Then I could blame you for tricking me. It was easier to hate you if you were always an asshole, and I needed to hate you for a little while.”

“Okay.” He has so many things he wants to say to her, a mixture of apologies and demands and accusations and desires and affection and confusion tumbling around in his head. He waits, for once, for her.

“I did it on purpose,” she confesses softly. “After that night. I was so happy, and then I felt guilty for being happy. I didn’t feel like I should want you again. I thought it made me weak, like they all

said I was.”

“You’re not.”

“I know,” she says, but she doesn’t sound very confident. “But that’s how I felt - feel, really. I was cruel, I was really horrible to you, and you didn’t deserve that. I’m sorry, Alexander.”

“Don’t apologize,” he says, shaking his head emphatically. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” she insists. “Just because you were wrong first doesn’t mean that I wasn’t wrong, too. Don’t treat me like I’m some child incapable of doing anything wrong. If we’re going to get past this, we have to be honest with each other.”

“Okay, fine. That night was the worst, but that wasn’t the first time you did something like that. It killed me, every time.” The words flood out of him, unstoppable as he’s really, truly honest with her for the first time since everything. “Not knowing where I stood with you. Not knowing if when you texted me on a Tuesday if it would be the last time you did that for a week. Not knowing if when or if you would ever love me again. I know I deserved you freezing me out, but it was those moments of us and then nothing that was more painful than if we hadn’t had them at all.”

“I know. I’m sorry, really. I won’t do it anymore.” She reaches out and lays a hand on his.

“I forgive you,” he says, turning his hand over in a silent invitation.

She takes it, lacing her fingers through his. “I forgive you, too.”

“No, Eliza, don’t.” He tries to pull his hand back but she holds firm. “I didn’t say that to make you say it back.”

“What did I just say about treating me like I can’t make my own decisions?” She stands up, frustrated. “I forgive you for the affair. I realized I did a few weeks ago, I just couldn’t work up the nerve to say it. I don’t want to rehash everything that we said and fought over when it all happened. You know how I feel, and you apologized. I always wanted to stay together. For things to be like they used to. I just needed time.”

“Sorry.”

“I forgive you for that, too,” she says, a small smile spreading across her face. “Look at us, handling our problems like adults.”

“I hate it,” he laughs. “I feel like I need to go yell at some people on Twitter for balance.”

“So. What are we gonna do?”

“We are going to have, God help us, a seventh child,” he says, grabbing her hand and pulling her down to sit in his lap. “And they will grow up to be as wonderful as their older siblings.”

“I think it’s going to be a girl,” she says thoughtfully, resting her hands on his where they’re laced over her stomach. “We could use another one of those around here.”

“No more naming after aunts. I can’t take the double trouble.”

She laughs before turning serious. “We’re going to be honest with each other. This is going to be hard and we can’t do it if we’re unintentionally pushing boundaries or whatever.”

“I promise,” he says into her shoulder. “We can do this, Liza. We really can.”

“Of course we can,” she agrees.

They sit there together, and it’s more than enough.

End Notes

thank you for reading! eliza's mirror piece is still a work in progress, please stay tuned! i'm already really excited about it.

i'm on [tumblr](#), come say hi.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!